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AUTHOR Mortensen, Peter L.
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ABSTRACT

The Appalachia that many metropolitans claim to know was discovered or invented between the Civil War and World War I. The idea of the Appalachians as impoverished, illiterate, and in desperate need of moral, economic, and educational uplift disseminated during those years was, in fact, a creation of the urban imagination; hence, discourse on Appalachia reveals more about urban preoccupations than about social conditions in the mountains. Local color fiction about turn of the century Appalachia is premised on the myth that literacy is a basic human right necessary for productive citizenship and fulfilling lives. After 1890, popular monthlies used "official" illiteracy rates to stigmatize the South. To attract Northern capital, Lexington, Kentucky's growing middle class needed to appear to be addressing illiteracy. A program of adult education and a Kentucky Illiteracy Commission were created. Newspaper coverage of those developments and of a statewide "Illiteracy Week" designated in 1914 to promote the commission's initiatives was phenomenal. The commission ceased to exist in 1920, without achieving its goal of ending illiteracy in Kentucky by that year. The experience challenged the literacy myth. Throughout the campaign, Lexington had used Appalachia as an example of the harm of illiteracy. Appalachia did, in fact, become more literate through industrialization, but that increase in literacy did not produce greater prosperity for the region's residents. (Twenty-one references and three exhibits are attached.) (SG)

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Peter L. Mortensen
Department of English
1215 Patterson Office Tower
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506-0027

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Introduction

The Appalachia that many metropolitans claim to know was discovered--some say invented--in the years between the Civil War and World War I. That period witnessed the rapid decline of agriculture in the southern mountains and the rise in its place of industrial culture, mostly in the form of timber and coal extraction (see Eller). This economic exploitation of the mountains was accompanied by discursive exploitation: journalists, novelists, social scientists, and other professionals began writing about Appalachia, began inscribing indelibly the idea of Appalachia and Appalachians as impoverished and illiterate, in desperate need of moral, economic, and educational uplift (see Shapiro). Figured this way, Appalachia is not so much a place as it is a "creature of the urban imagination" (Batteau 1). Consequently, discourse on Appalachia often reveals much more about urban preoccupations than it does about social conditions in the mountains.

Previously I have made the case that local color fiction about turn-of-the-century Appalachia tends to be premised on what Harvey Graff calls the "literacy myth": the inaccurate notion that literacy is necessarily "a basic human right and a tool for productive citizenship and fulfilling lives" (Mortensen; Graff

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2). Invoking this myth, local colorists like John Fox, Jr., characterized mountain culture as stagnant because illiterate, while they celebrated the newly modern, highly literate conditions of their urban homeplaces. I mention Fox here not because he is especially remembered or admired today, but because his two best selling novels--The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come (1903) and Trail of the Lonesome Pine (1908)--disseminated to millions of urban, middle-class readers his damaging notions about literacy in the mountains.

Fox and his literary cohorts constituted Appalachia as what Raymond Williams calls a "knowable community": a domain wherein simple, unmediated relations make it possible for an observer to know wholly and reliably the social life there. But, Williams cautions, such an observer always--and often unwittingly--narrates "not only the reality of the rural community," but also "the observer's position in and towards it; a position which is part of the community being known" (165).

To be sure, much has been written about the local colorists' treatment of the mountains and mountain people, so my aim today is not to assess the fairness or precision of their narratives. Rather, I intend to follow Williams's example and make reflexive the gaze of mountain observers like Fox and his readers, and to question the relationship of literacy and culture in an early twentieth-century urban setting. In so doing, I will pay particular attention to a 1914 state-wide campaign against illiteracy in Kentucky led by a woman from the very mountains Fox described--in fact, from the county which, in several Fox novels,

is besieged by the so-called "feuding" that supposedly grew out of mountaineers' disdain for the literate institution of law. As I go on, I'll focus specifically on how the campaign against illiteracy played in Lexington and in Fayette County, historic center of Kentucky's bluegrass region. We will see that Lexington's response to the 1914 campaign was strongly conditioned by its struggle with the myths of literacy and Appalachia inherited from previous generations.

Resistance

It is important to recall that while Fox and other southern local colorists were inscribing narratives about literacy oppressive to mountain people, their writing also functioned as resistance to a more powerful discourse which consigned all states of the southern tier to secondary status in the union. One need only glance at the New York Times and the popular monthlies after 1890 or so to get a sense of how "official" illiteracy rates were used to stigmatize the South (see "Nation's Illiterates"; "The Week"). What emerged from this narrative alchemy was an interesting transference of narrative representation: to put it oversimply, northern writers claimed that the South was illiterate, and southern writers claimed southern illiteracy (at least among white males of voting age) was confined largely to the mountains. In 1900, this transference largely worked. Indeed, many northern social scientists took local color fiction as a point of departure for early ethnographic studies of Appalachia (e.g., see MacClintock). Few writers bothered to wonder why adult literacy rates for

growing urban areas such as Lexington and Louisville were the same as or worse than those of many mountain counties in eastern Kentucky.

Then came the census of 1910. As it had in the past, Kentucky ranked near the bottom of the nationwide survey of adult illiteracy. But this time, shifting blame to the mountain districts would not suffice, especially since the vagaries of literary taste had by then eliminated local color as a channel for emphasizing illiteracy in the mountains. Ranking so low was certainly not good for business--and business with northern capitalists was starting to stimulate the growth of Lexington's middle class. As a case in point, in 1910 and thereafter, Lexington business interests were doing their best to capture some part of the great mineral wealth to be mined out of the eastern Kentucky coal fields (Eller 128-60). Thus, if Lexington were to appear attractive to northern capital, it must do something to address the problem of illiteracy in Kentucky--or more precisely, the problem that census illiteracy statistics created for the commonwealth's image.

The problem was easy enough to dramatized. In 1913, for example, Commissioner of Education Philander P. Claxton issued a report in which he imagined the nation's five million supposed illiterates arranged in "double line of march" between Washington, DC, and Jacksonville, Florida. They would constitute a "mighty army," he wrote,

> with their banners of blackness and darkness inscribed with the legends of illiteracy, ignorance, weakness,

> helplessness, and hoplessness [sic]--too large for the safety of our democratic institutions, for the highest good of society, and for the greatest degree of material prosperity. (Illiteracy 7)

Claxton then proceeded to cite profound differences between urban and rural illiteracy: of the country's urban population, 5.1 percent was said to be illiterate, and of the rural population, 10.1 percent (7). For Lexington, the implications of this statement were ambiguous. In 1913, Lexington, with a population near 30,000, straddled the urban/rural distinction: it was larger than a "small town" and so certainly not rural, but neither was it fully an "urban community." What it could boast was a tangible commitment to elite cultural tradition. Once dubbed the "Athens of the West," Lexington could rightly claim the first college and first public library west of the Alleghenies. Realistically, though, rural agriculture still meant a great deal to Lexington's economy, even if it were not fashionable to recognize the fact. Illiteracy, as it was defined by the Census Bureau, permeated all sections of Lexington and Fayette County--the country and the city. So what, according to Claxton, should be done about it? "To wait for a generation of illiterate men, women, and children to die is a slow and painful process," he observed (28). Hence the need for a more efficient solution: "teach these grown-ups, in schools organized especially for them, to read and write, and possibly something more" (28).

As a model of such teaching, Claxton pointed to the

"Moonlight Schools" of mountainous Rowan County, founded by day school superintendent Cora Wilson Stewart. The Moonlight Schools earned their name because of the weeknight hours they kept in ordinarily empty day school classrooms. With a corps of dedicated volunteer instructors--mainly school teachers and "club women"--Stewart claimed to have educated thousands of illiterates between 1911 and 1913. And as proof, Stewart offered specimens of student writing--usually letters from students testifying to how little time it had taken to master basic reading and writing skills. (See Exhibit 1 on handout.)

As explained by Claxton, the Moonlight School project appeared a simple, effective, and inexpensive remedy to a seemingly intractable problem. Little surprise, then, that Stewart was able to persuade Kentucky's governor and the legislature of 1914 to go state-wide with Moonlight Schools for adult illiterates. The commonwealth's growing obsession with its educational shortcomings--and the public perception thereof--called for just this sort of "war against the enslavement of illiteracy," to quote a phrase Stewart was fond of using. But how to take the campaign state-wide, and how to address illiteracy in both urban and rural districts?

This was to be accomplished under authority of the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, empowered by the 1914 General Assembly to seek out illiterates and train them either in Moonlight Schools, or at home. The commission, with Stewart as head, was to serve patriotically without remuneration, as the governor put it (qtd. in First Biennial Report 5). In one of her first official

gesture, Stewart persuaded the U.S. Census Bureau, against set policy, to release the names of all those enumerated as illiterate in the 1910 census. Her next move was to designate a state-wide "Illiteracy Week" in late November, 1914, during which the commission's initiatives would be introduced to prospective Moonlight School students and teachers (see Nelms).

Several months before "Illiteracy Week," a brief item of interest appeared in the Lexington Herald. The superintendent of the Fayette County Schools had taken a census of all adult illiterates over twenty years of age. The "highly gratifying results" showed a total of only 195 adult illiterates in the county, proof that the problem was "not as pervasive as it has been painted by some writers and speakers"--speakers such as Cora Wilson Stewart. Ironically, the story carried the headline, "Many Illiterates in County of Fayette," perhaps indicating the ambiguity Lexingtonians felt toward Stewart's efforts (8, emphasis added).

This number, 195, was considerably less than the one the Illiteracy Commission had derived from the 1910 census. The commission figured 4,963 persons in Fayette County to be illiterate, about half of them males of voting age (First Biennial Report 81, 84-85). As a percentage of its total population, this figure placed the county fifty-second among Kentucky's 119 counties, and thus well behind most mountain counties, except those in far southeastern Kentucky (Moonlight School Course of Study 75). Such a discrepancy could hardly be explained away by the currency or local authority of the

superintendent's survey, and indeed it was not. The commission's count of 4,963 illiterates in the county, 12.6 percent of its population, prevailed in news accounts of the commission's activities--that is, on those rare occasions when such numbers were mentioned at all.

When "Illiteracy Week" finally arrived in Lexington in late November, 1914, it drew to parades and rallies the best and most distinguished speakers in town. And to each platform and pulpit these speakers brought diverse views about illiteracy, shaped, no doubt, by their professional and economic interests. For example, the president of Kentucky State University (now the University of Kentucky) argued that "Lexington in the future . . . would find education, not tobacco, whisky, and race horses, its greatest asset," and he predicted that the campaign would ultimately bring, tuition in hand, "10,000 students to the educational institutions in the city" ("Facts of Illiteracy" 1). In other words, the work of the Illiteracy Commission held strong potential for boosting expansion of the state's flagship institution of higher learning. Other speakers addressed other interests, most of which had to do with luring northern capital into the region. All speakers encouraged private contributions to the "war" on illiteracy. But no one discussed Fayette County's possible problems with illiteracy--although, uncharacteristically, neither did anyone point an accusing finger eastward toward the mountains. This may well have resulted from Stewart's careful control of the campaign and her absolute unwillingness to allow her mountain home to stand once again as

scapegoat for the commonwealth's troubles.

Newspaper coverage of "Illiteracy Week" was phenomenal. In the last two weeks of November, the Democratic Herald ran sixteen news articles and two editorial pieces. Indeed, for a string of thirteen days, an article on the campaign appeared everyday. By contrast, during the same period, the Republican Lexington Leader ran eleven stories and editorialized only once on the subject. It should be noted that the Leader's commitment in column inches was far less than the Herald's. Although it kept the campaign in the news, the Leader did so with relatively short articles printed back of the front page.

But a comparison of column inches only begins to reveal each paper's--and political party's--investment in the Illiteracy Commission's work. In a Sunday editorial at the conclusion of "Illiteracy Week," the Democratic Herald's sympathies lay with the plight of illiterates and the wisdom of those who chose to help them. It opined that "[t]he test of whether a man or a woman can read or write is coming more and more to be the dividing line between success, self-support and a good reputation, and failure, dependency and shiftlessness." The editorial goes on to boast that "[i]n such a work, Lexington can well afford to take a large part, a part befitting her fame as an educational center, a part befitting her envied prosperity" ("Get To Work" 4).

The Republican Leader took a different tack. Representing the minority party, it complained that "[o]ver two hundred thousand Kentuckians can neither read nor write. Near a hundred

thousand men who have the right to vote cannot read their ballot. The controlling factor in every election, the men who swing the balance of power in every political contest, are unable to read the ballot that they stamp in accord with the advice or at the dictation of some other man" ("A Genuine Forward Movement" 4). Not coincidentally, the eastern mountains were full of registered Republicans, individuals who in the early twentieth century had not always cast votes consistent with their party affiliation (see McKinney). The implication here is subtle, but it is also clear: increased literacy in the mountains might return a Republican governor to the capitol. By the same logic, increased literacy in Fayette County would likely strengthen the Democratic grip on state government. From the Leader's perspective, then, support of the Illiteracy Commission's work in the mountains could deliver political benefits; the same work in Fayette County could have the opposite effect.

In the midst of this editorial posturing, mention of pedagogy was scant. However, when pedagogy was mentioned, what was usually stressed was the ease and rapidity with which adults could learn to read and write. In fact, some adults, Stewart claimed, could compose letters to loved ones after just two or three evening sessions; most others took only a little longer. Moonlight School teaching guides and student textbooks carried the same message. (See Exhibit 2 on handout.)

After the "Illiteracy Week" of 1914, the fortunes of the Illiteracy Commission rose and fell until it was disbanded by the legislature, just one week before the 1920 census. Not

surprisingly, the commission did not reach its stated goal of "no illiteracy in Kentucky in 1920." That year's census showed marked improvement in the state's illiteracy rate, but not in its national rank, mostly because states across the union were becoming uniformly more literate. The number of illiterate men and women in Lexington grew between 1910 and 1920, roughly apace with expansion of its total population.

Conclusion

I should like to conclude by speculating that during the "Illiteracy Week" of 1914, middle-class Lexington momentarily challenged the literacy myth that it had inherited from the nineteenth century. It did so as a matter of self-interest, out of concern that to embrace the myth would be to deny Lexington's capacity to participate in a modern industrial economy. Challenging the literacy myth was initially made difficult by the fact that in 1914 Lexington could not easily figure the mountains as an illiterate, "other" America against which to measure its progress toward literate modernity. The only option left was to pretend that illiteracy in Fayette County would not, after all, impede its advance on the developed capital markets of the North.

Of course, this curious moment did not last for very long. By 1919 the Illiteracy Commission was itself trading in images potentially oppressive to rural and mountain culture, as can be seen in the Illiteracy Commission poster produced by Louisville Courier-Journal political cartoonist Paul Plaschke ("Poster" 1). (See Exhibit 3 on handout.) And between 1914 and 1920, mountain culture itself had been radically changed. The massive expansion

of coal mining operations during the war in Europe had brought industry and basic literacy to many mountain counties, although that literacy did not accompany the individual prosperity promised by the literacy myth.

A wide range of questions about the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, its personnel, and its initiatives remain unanswered. For example, to what extent were the urban and rural poor, women, and African Americans rendered marginal by male, middle-class Lexington's treatment of the literacy question? How did discourse on moral hygiene and eugenics figure into local discussions of literacy? And in what ways did women's organizations contribute to the shape of the commission's campaign against illiteracy? Further, how did women's campaigns for suffrage and temperance intersect with commission activities? And how, more generally, was progressive political and educational reform in the South relevant to the Illiteracy Commission's work?

Answers to these and other questions may bring us to a better understanding of how urban preoccupations with illiteracy have created--and continue to create--quite coercive, injurious narratives about the illiterate otherness of southern Appalachia.

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Peter L. Mortensen
Department of English
1215 Patterson Office Tower
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506-0027

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Whitley City Ky
Nov. 11, 1919

Dear Mrs. Stewart:-

I have gone to moon light school nine nights and to-night I will finish my first book. I Glad I am to learn to read and write. I am twenty seven. I would be glad to get a letter from you.

Yours truly
Sarah Jane Cobbey

EXHIBIT 1
Report of the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, 1916-1920.
Louisville: Standard Printing, 1920. 93.

22

tax es crime where goes schools
oth er down land glad dis ease

I shall pay my taxes.
I pay a tax on my home.
I pay a tax on my land.
I pay a tax on my cattle.
I pay a tax on my money.
I pay a tax on many other things.
Where does this money go?
It goes to keep up the schools.
It goes to keep up the roads.
It goes to keep down crime.
It goes to keep down disease.
I am glad that I have a home to pay taxes on.

I am glad that I have a home to pay taxes on.

23

Barren Fork, Ky.,
Sept. 5, 1915.

Dear Mother:

I have learned to read and write. I am writing you my first letter. This is written in the moonlight school. In this school grown men and women learn to read and write.

I hope to write you many letters and to read many from your dear hand.

With much love,
Your son,
William Read.

26

yarn ball sky no ba by
blue col or red eye ba by's

"What color shall I paint my house? Shall I paint it red?"

"No, red is for the barn and the ball of yarn."

"What color shall I paint my house? Shall I paint it blue?"

"No, blue is for the sky and the baby's eye."

27

gray then seen tan taste
soft show white use there

"What color shall I paint my house? Shall I paint it green?"

"No, the trees are all green, and the house will not be seen."

"What color, then, shall I paint my house? Tell me what colors you like."

"I like white. Then there are many soft colors that you can use. There are tan, gray, and brown."

"I will show my taste by painting my house a soft color."

I will show my taste by painting my house a soft color.

EXHIBIT 2
Stewart, Cora Wilson. *Country Life Readers: First Book.* Richmond: B. F. Johnson Publishing Co., 1915.

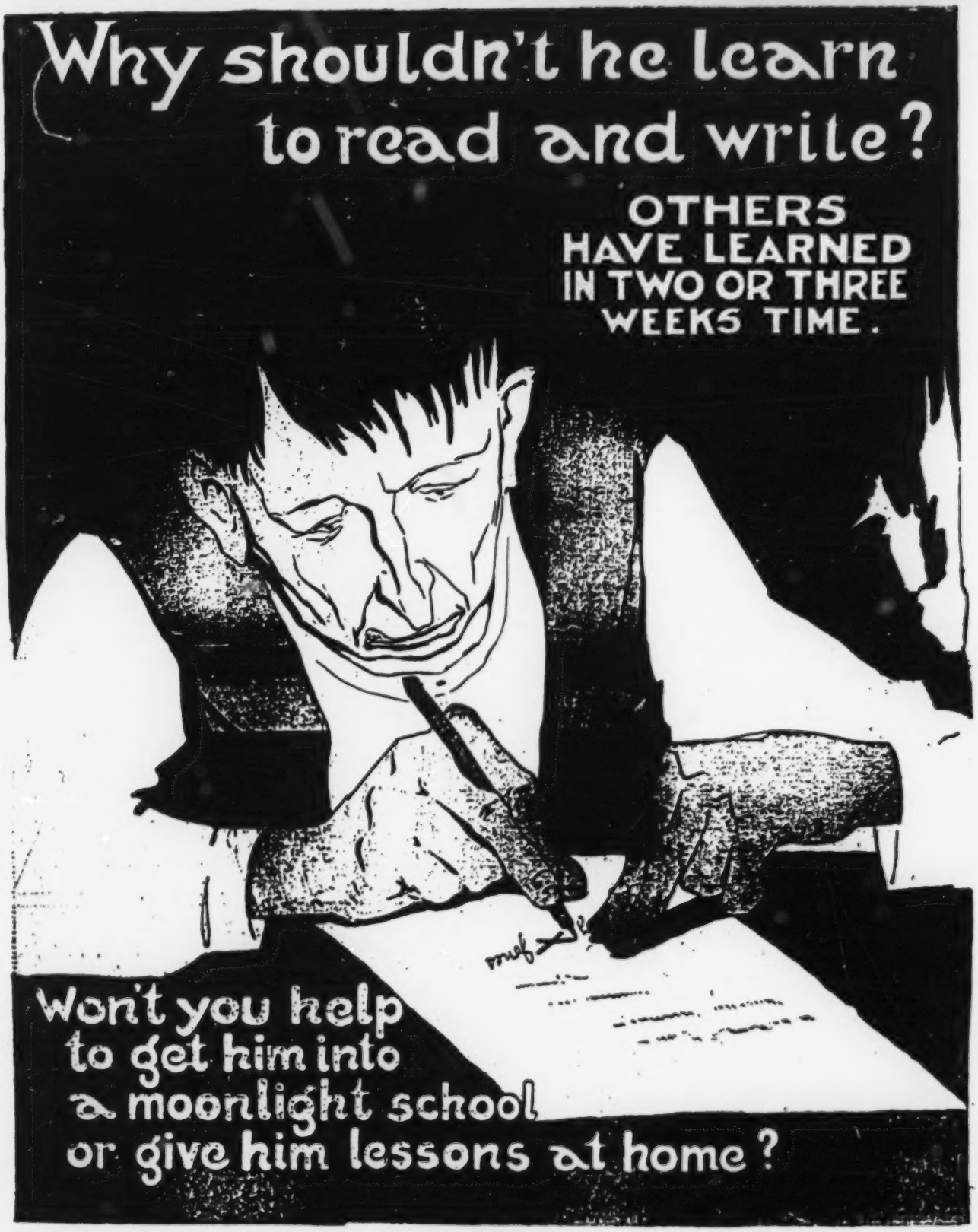
Why shouldn't he learn to read and write?
OTHERS HAVE LEARNED IN TWO OR THREE WEEKS TIME.
Won't you help to get him into a moonlight school or give him lessons at home?

EXHIBIT 3

Plaschke, Paul. *Why Shouldn't He Learn to Read and Write?*
First appeared in Louisville *Courier-Journal* Sunday magazine, August 29, 1919.